

COMMUNITY

An even more neighborly Southside

By JIMMY STOUT

As an introduction in his book "Outliers," Malcolm Gladwell introduces us to the people of Rossetto, Pa., in order to identify a concept in success that is often forgotten: social capital.

The Rossettans, although part of a larger area, had lower heart disease, fewer cancers and no peptic ulcer disease compared to nearby areas. The majority of people basically died of old age. Years of scientific study to evaluate genetics and the environment yielded little information to reveal why this group was different. This community was succeeding where others around it failed, so it was a true statistical outlier.

The simple, though long-sought, answer is community. Partly the handshake-come-over-for-dinner kind, but also the effective shaping of the physical and social environment by a concerted effort on the part of neighbors, business people, leaders and others.

It's time to re-evaluate our situation in the Five Points South neighborhood. We are the most cosmopolitan neighborhood in Birmingham, but good business people know that to have a competitive advantage you must often reinvent your product, re-examine your customer and reconsider your options. Good business people understand you build on strength, not weakness.

In Southside, one (but not the only) such strength is structure. Five Points South is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Birmingham. Old, wide streets and appealing architecture make us interesting. Proximity to a huge chunk of Alabama's economy and one of the largest employers and educational institutions in Alabama with UAB makes us necessary. Now is the time to build on this.

How? First, we should take advantage of small, vacant lots to provide proximate spaces of beauty. The overwhelming popularity of the George Ward dog park reveals a market opportunity for our community. With such a dense population of dog owners,

these parks are not only welcome, but sorely needed. We could easily refashion underutilized public spaces in Five Points South to accommodate animal lovers.

Second, we could recreate our streets to slow traffic and invite the pedestrian and bicyclist. UAB plays host to the largest concentration of pedestrians and bicycle riders in Birmingham. We have it within our ability to engineer streets to accommodate walkers and slow drivers merely by shaping their environment. Want to encourage bicycle riding? Let's include a few bicycle lanes in all of the current repaving of streets.

By encouraging more pedestrians and bicyclists to hit the street, you not only encourage neighborly interactions, but promote healthful lifestyles and put "eyes on the streets." Dog owners, walkers and bicyclists who already spend more time outside by necessity will serve as de facto patrols as they congregate in local parks and move about the city. This is not only something that neighbors appreciate, but the Birmingham Police Department desperately wants.

With an excellent university and business district at its heart, the time to focus on the rest of the neighborhood and the city has come. By increasing the number of green spaces, off-leash dog parks and bicycle lanes on the Southside, you encourage more personal involvement by residents.

I would like to see these issues addressed not only by my city, county and state representatives, but by me and my neighbors, too. The momentum for more healthful lifestyles and neighborhoods is building, and the idea of a more walkable, active and vibrant neighborhood has the wind at its back. Let's let Southside unfurl its sail.

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GULF: Don't let spill spoil vacation

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As we are called to action, we will respond with the dauntless spirit of coastal people, especially those born in the hurricane corridor. We will weather this storm as we have weathered the other monsters that have roared upon our shores in the past: by working hard, side by side, with dedication, compassion and a sense of community, and earning some fun in the process.

I am hoping there will be little damage or interruption of beach recreation. Perhaps the oil spill will be just an inconvenience, much like too many jellyfish in the water or the occasional riptides.

If not, we are going to need everyone's love, support and help. So I have a very special invitation for people to join us here in Gulf Shores and Orange Beach and on Dauphin Island and Mobile Bay.

Don't cancel your plans or reservations. This could be one of the most memorable vacations you will ever have.

Most of you travel with children. What a great opportunity to teach our kids so many valuable life lessons — from the beauty of volunteering to the importance of helping your neighbor during a crisis,



learning about the fragile ecosystem that created the remarkable Gulf of Mexico, and meeting new friends from all over the country with the same purpose of keeping our beautiful shores safe for our children and wildlife.

Recently, I asked a friend's 6-year-old if she knew how many oceans there were. "One, Miss Lucy," she promptly responded. Then with a little hesitation, she added, "Don't they all touch?"

Out of the mouths of babes. What is happening in our backyard could just as easily be happening in yours. But does it matter? We are all one. We all touch.

Am I outraged? Yes! Is there a need for accountability? Yes! But that is not my job. There are others who are trained and better

equipped to master that task. I'm a fry cook. I'm open for business. And so is the Alabama Gulf Coast.

We will take each day as it comes and make the best of it.

I am asking all of you who love this area as much as I do and love your own coastal areas to please not abandon us.

I promise you we will welcome you with open arms, some ice-cold sweet tea, an ocean of belly laughs, a plate full of scrumptious food and a humble, grateful heart.

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OBESITY: Lawyers can't win this battle

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healthier food, better quality school lunches, and an end to the target marketing of children by snack food and soda companies.

In response, and no doubt to fend off regulation, 16 food makers last week agreed to introduce lower-calorie alternatives to sodas, snacks, cereals and other products.

Meanwhile, legislators across the country have proposed taxes on sodas and snacks. Several cities, most notably Los Angeles, have sought to apply zoning laws to restrict the number of fast-food outlets in neighborhoods. New York City now requires that restaurants list the calories of all items on the menu.

Virtually all health professionals, teachers and fitness experts agree that better school-based dietary education and the return of daily physical education are essential to reversing the obesity trend. (I believe a swimming pool at every school and health care facility would do wonders.) Diabetes educators at Cooper Green are already setting a standard for enhancing the nutrition of patients and their families.

Sadly, too many approaches to the problem of obesity are deceptive or impractical. Quick-weight-loss centers promise you'll drop 30 pounds in 30 days. (They forget to add that you'll gain it back even quicker.) Drug companies raise false hopes with pills that will melt away pounds. Cigarette makers deceive with brands like Virginia Slims and Superslims. Some surgical groups propose expanding the numbers of obesity bypass operations, even in teenagers.

But the group that takes the

cake is plaintiffs attorneys, fresh from suing tobacco companies, who now aim to drag the fast-food chains and junk-food makers into court, alleging corporate manipulation of our kids.

Fat chance. The comparison between Big Tobacco and Big Food simply doesn't apply, because the problem of obesity has infinitely more causes than tobacco addiction. I don't doubt that the fast-food chains have contributed to the decline in American eating habits. But wouldn't we also have to hold liable every local mom-and-pop hamburger joint, doughnut drive-in and ice cream shop, as well as the snack food, candy and soda makers, not to mention the farmers and agribusinessmen who give us high-fructose corn syrup?

Even the various taxes on soda that are gaining momentum in some states are fraught with hypocrisy. The states won't use this tax money to fight obesity any more than they have used cigarette taxes to fight smoking.

And what were the states doing about rising obesity rates for all these decades? The American Academy of Pediatrics now blames obesity in part on soda sales in schools. (The American Academy of Family Physicians won't be such a naysayer: It just signed a deal with Coca-Cola to help family doctors educate their patients about nutrition.) But few seem to want to ask when and how the soda machines ever made their way into schools to begin with.

I was training in family medicine in Miami in 1977 when that city's school board held hearings on whether to permit soda sales in the schools, and I was one of the few who testified against these contracts.

A soda spokesman actually testified that a bottle of ketchup contained more sugar than a can of his company's cola. The lone physician on the school board, a pedi-

atrician, said that since schoolkids no longer drank milk anyway, they'd simply leave the school to get their sodas at the corner store — and get killed crossing the street. He voted to install the soda machines, as did most of the other school board members. The soda companies also offered to place scoreboards on the football fields that would provide advertising revenue to the schools. In short, nobody broke anybody's arm convincing school systems they'd benefit from soda.

We went through this again nationally in the 1980s with the proliferation in school classrooms of Channel One, a TV network with bits of news in between junk-food commercials that the kids were required to watch as a condition of the schools getting free TV sets. Some deal. What 15 extra minutes of physical education daily could have done instead!

So the attorneys ought to be sure to include Channel One in their lawsuits. And why not add ABC, NBC, CBS, ESPN and the other TV networks that play those same commercials and keep us sitting on our sofas hooked on soap operas and sports? Then there's the NFL, NASCAR, the NCAA, Major League Baseball and other spectator sports leagues, not to mention the manufacturers of cars, computers, cellphones and videogames that have contributed to making America's youth the fattest and most sedentary in the world.

But the lawyers don't dare suggest parents ought to take any responsibility for maintaining the centuries-old tradition of the sit-down family meal, or for choosing fresh produce over processed food, or for getting in our cars to go two blocks to get more soda and snacks.

Maybe they can just sue the schools for failing to educate our kids. Or the surgeons for not doing obesity bypass operations fast enough.

TEACHER: Missed opportunity to discuss violence

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reprimand him.

What did shock me were the reactions of the students to his eventual suspension. Those students, both former and current, to whom I am still connected through Facebook or other connections, have surprised me with their outrage at Harrison's suspension. I've seen cries of liberal backlash, of left-wing hypocrisy and, worst of all, of this being some kind of "reverse discrimination" (whatever that is supposed to mean) against a white man talking about violence toward a black man.

I saw no one discussing the real issue here.

Regardless of your views of President Barack Obama or the dangerous party divisions in our country, what Harrison did was wrong. I've read the story, and I know Harrison was led to the discussion by a student who suggested the example of presidential assassination. I realize he only discussed shooting off the ear of our commander in chief.

But no technicality and no special circumstances make his actions acceptable. This isn't about white vs. black or liberal vs. conservative. Harrison's story isn't even about the federal offense of making threats against the president. His crime is the violation of the trust of his students, an offense far more dangerous, in the long run.

Harrison is a well-liked teacher, one students listen to and even talk to. That's a rarity in our education system. That is not a reason to go easy on Harrison. In fact, he deserves all the more punishment.

Harrison was in a position of power, as all teachers inherently are. Instead of taking the chance to tell his student that assassination attempts aren't a laughing matter, especially not when made against a president who has faced so much hatred here in the South, he allowed the "joke" to continue. He continued on a path that implied that murder, in and of itself, is a topic easy to

ridicule and even fun to discuss.

The sad fact is this very hatred and division that are cropping up in talk-radio discussions and on-line comments about the story are exactly the points Harrison should have addressed to his students. Instead of perpetuating hatred, Harrison should have spoken of the unacceptable nature of violence, especially within schools.

When our officials and teachers merely continue to support violence and anger, we've truly lost the minds of our students. The comments I've seen only make me more certain Harrison's actions have instilled a dangerous belief in those who knew him: that there is nothing wrong with violence, especially against someone you do not like.

Inevitably, Harrison's future lies with the Jefferson County school board. More important, so does the future of Corner High School's students. Regardless of the outcome for Harrison, Corner's students need a chance to discuss the incident as a whole and one on one.

Corner's students are owed an explanation for all that is going on around them. From what I've seen, they need to have a chance to discuss school violence. They need a chance to learn about what to do when a teacher uses his power over a classroom for something unacceptable.

Our students face dangers both in and out of school that make even the issues I dealt with only four years ago seem meaningless.

Corner's students not only need vindication against an abuse of power, but support in talking about their feelings, fears, and all those little things they can't sort out that have come up because of this incident.

We owe it to our students to guide them, and to help them better themselves along the way. After all, that is what a good teacher, and a good community, should do.

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DAVIS: Battle of Old vs. New Guard

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founder of the New South and founder of the Citizens Coalition, is more tactful but clear: "As good a man as Artur Davis is, I'm not sure he can win." Emory Anthony Jr., president of the Progressive Council, says simply that "Artur just doesn't get it."

Whether this gamble was a smart, gutsy move or a dumb, panicky mistake will manifest itself in the June 1 Democratic Party showdown with Ron Sparks (and perhaps in the November contest with the opposition party's nominee). Polls show Davis still in the lead, but the primary appears to be tightening as Democrats worry about a domestic disaster and Republicans happily keep their distance from the Donkey dispute.

Davis' startling strategy is interesting, but his gamble actually has more important ramifications than personalities and tactics for this campaign. The electoral outcome bears watching mainly because it may be a real game-changer, indicating broader, systemic shifts in state and regional democracy.

Normally in statewide elections, the minority vote coalesces around a relatively progressive white politician in the Democratic primary; then that nominee garners about 90 percent of the black vote against the Republican nominee in the general election. That has been a successful strategy for maximizing black influence in Southern elections ever since the civil rights movement.

But this election — featuring Davis as a young, polished, new guard African-American leader with a serious shot at winning the Democratic nomination — has created problems for older, traditional black leaders.

Many in the old guard earned their spurs in the civil rights movement. They see Davis as an upstart who cannot win the general election and who may jeopardize down-ballot party candidates. And Davis did not endear himself with them when he recently voted against President Barack Obama's health care plan. Therefore, many in the black establishment have saddled up with Sparks, the white opponent who has a more comfortable relationship with those leaders. Davis' decision to forgo seeking endorsements from the black organizations strikes some as admitting he was not likely to get those endorsements.

Davis, however, offers an alternative explanation that directly challenges the older generation and established black

organizations. To paraphrase what he has told me and others:

I respect all these leaders for what they've contributed to black progress in Alabama. But today's black citizens are smart enough to make up their own minds. The idea that a few powerful bosses can control today's black voters and that those voters need to have a marked ballot to tell them how to vote for governor is an insult to their intelligence, and I'm not going to play that game.

This dispute among Davis, black leaders, black organizations and black voters could reverberate throughout campaigns far beyond this year and this state. This is a fundamental, historic fight that will tell whether standard racial strategy of the past few decades is yielding to a different role for African-Americans in Democratic Party politics and overall governance.

Seasoned analysts point out that African-American Obama did very poorly in Alabama, so Davis cannot afford to lose any black votes in his biracial coalition. But they acknowledge, too, that the black leadership was aligned against Davis in 2002 when he first won his congressional seat against incumbent Earl Hilliard. They note that much of that black establishment sided with Hillary Clinton against Obama, who won big in the state's 2008 presidential primary.

If the old guard can hold its organizational sway over black voters on June 1, then politician Davis is doomed, and the conventional formula for black politics — a formula that has worked effectively here for decades — will continue.

But if leader Davis sufficiently woos black voters as individual, independent agents in that primary, then he will rewrite the textbook for racial and party campaigns thereafter. Regardless whether he wins the governorship, he will have beaten the civil rights-era icons, and he will have fractured traditional notions about black bloc voting. Other Democratic politicians — both black and white — will consider altering their strategies. Even Republicans might revise their thinking about courting minority voters.

Race has been a driving force in this part of the country for a long time, and that is not likely to change now. But if Artur Davis wins this struggle with the old guard, the race game of Alabama and Southern politics could change significantly.

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